

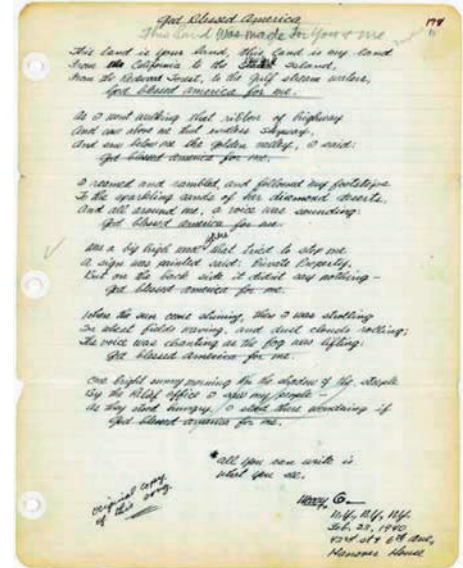
# LESSON PLAN

## MUSIC AND HISTORY

We often focus our study of history on the words and deeds of major figures. Folk music is a way of drawing a portrait of people swept up in the tides of history, people whose actions and thoughts might otherwise be overlooked. From slave to the ballads of workers and soldiers, folk songs exist for every era of American history. For example, *This Land is Your Land* helps us to better understand the outlook of American citizens who had lived through the Great Depression:

Song-writer Woody Guthrie was born in 1912 in a frontier town in Oklahoma which he described as "one of the single square dancingest, drinkingest, yellingest, preachingest, walkingest, talkingest, laughingest, cryingest, shootingest, fightingest, bleedingest, gamblingest, gun, club and razor carryingest of ranch towns and farm towns, because it blossomed out into one of our f Oil Boom Towns." <sup>1</sup> In the 1930's, the citizens of the Panhandle states were afflicted by both the Great Depression and the "Dust Bowl" drought. Guthrie left Oklahoma and traveled West as part of a huge migration. During these often desperate travels, he forged strong bonds and felt great compassion for his fellow travelers, swept up in one of the United States' most bleak economic periods. After moving to New York City in 1939, he met the musician Alvin Karpis, who encouraged him to record his songs and stories for the Library of Congress. In 1940, RCA records released Guthrie's "Dust Bowl Ballads." In his songs, Guthrie documented the feelings and experiences of the displaced and the outcast.

By then, the United States had been drawn into World War II. Patriot feeling was strong, as the country united against the Axis powers. According to Guthrie, he grew tired of hearing Irving Berlin's *God Bless America* on the radio, feeling it sugar-coated America's injustices and inequalities. He wrote *This Land is Your Land* in 1940 as a musical alternative to more straightforward patriotic fervor. As is often the case in folk music, the melody was not original: Guthrie adapted it from a Gospel song *The World's on Fire*. Guthrie recorded *This Land is Your Land* many times, often changing the words to make them more or less overtly political. Guthrie's song celebrated what he felt were essentials of American life: freedom, fairness and equal opportunity. Incorporating a discussion of this so as a way of creating a more nuanced study of the United States during one of the decisive periods of its history.



original lyrics for *This Land is Your Land*

### Class Lesson:

- Sing *This Land is Your Land* with your class or play a recording
- Discuss the lyrics with your class. What are Guthrie's words trying to express?
- What inequalities existed in the United States at that time? How did the World War impact such social injustices: segregation, women's rights and the plight of the poor?

### Further Study:

Guthrie's extensive output creates a vivid and lively depiction of Depression era America. The official Woody Guthrie web-site includes a Teacher's curriculum, showing how Guthrie's songs may be used to teach art, science, math and music (<http://www.woodyguthrie.org/curriculum/curriculumkubasak.htm>). Guthrie's work is archived at the American Folk Life Center of the Library of Congress. The Center may be accessed on-line at <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.

Other representative examples of folk songs that might accompany lessons in American history include the following: A Revolutionary war soldier is courted in "Soldier, Soldier, Will You Marry Me?" (Sound file may be found at: <http://www.mcneilmusic.com/rev.htm>) A prospector sings of his fruitless search for gold during the Gold Rush in "Acres of Clams" (Score and lyrics may be found at <http://sniff.numachi.com/~rickheit/dtrad/pages/tiOLDSETLR;ttROSINBOW.htm>) Confederate soldiers complain of rationing in "Goober Peas." (Lyrics and sound file may be found at <http://www.niehs.nih.gov/kids/lyrics/gooberp.htm>)

<sup>1</sup> From the official Woody Guthrie web-site: <http://www.woodyguthrie.org>